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# “Close Enough”

## Images of the Failure of the 1990s’ Political Transformation in Poland as Exemplified by Władysław Pasikowski’s *Psy* [Pigs] and Andrzej Żuławski’s *Szamanka* [She-Shaman]

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**Abstract:** This article problematizes the Polish cinema of the 1990s by analyzing it in terms of the aesthetic of failure. Of crucial importance for that interpretation is the postcolonial perspective. Seen from this perspective, Poland of the political transformation period appears a land of unfulfilled dreams of being-like-the-West. One of the spheres where this is visible is the Polish cinematography of that time.

**Keywords:** failure; Poland; close enough; cinema; Andrzej Żuławski; Władysław Pasikowski

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Bad Polish movies from the 1990s are artistic documents of a failed era. Their further fates are as important in reading them as the contents of their scripts and what is seen on screen. Back in the day, they inspired and shocked; today, they provoke amusement and nostalgia. Images of the failure from those times are like a black box filled with information on how the Poles lived, what inspired them and, most importantly, what they tried to escape from (in vain).

In this text, I intend to show how the cinema of the 1990s grappled with the traumatic experience of the political transformation, which I will attempt to illustrate with the example of two movies: Władysław Pasikowski’s *Psy* [Pigs] (Pasikowski, 1992) and Andrzej Żuławski’s *Szamanka* [She-Shaman] (Żuławski, 1995).

### A Landscape of Failure

The generation of directors such as Andrzej Wajda, Kazimierz Kutz or Jerzy Kawalerowicz created a strong cinematographic tradition whose artistic value was appreciated by audiences all over the world. The phenomenon of the Polish Film School has been lauded with numerous awards and nominations that Polish creators garnered on international festivals. Despite the unfavourable circumstances, Polish films secured a strong presence west of the Iron Curtain.<sup>1</sup> Given this, it may have seemed that the drastic

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<sup>1</sup> In the years 1963–1981, Polish films received seven Oscar nominations. In the PRL (People’s Republic of Poland) period, Polish cinematography could also boast successes at the Cannes Festival: the 1981 Golden Palm

change of political circumstances after 1989 would only improve the cinematographic situation: greater freedom in choosing topics, experimenting with form, and as a consequence, a wave of new movies that would take global markets – both commercial and festival – by storm. Nothing of the sort happened, however. The crisis was palpable on the domestic front as well, as evidenced by the fact that over a period of 10 years, the Gdynia Film Festival jury decided twice not to award the Grand Prix (in 1991 and 1996).

The collapse of communism brought both opportunities and threats to the Polish cinematography. On the one hand, all the restrictions of censorship and ideological indoctrination were taken down, but on the other hand, there emerged the challenges of the free market. In the description of the intellectual atmosphere on the eve of overthrowing communism Adam Zagajewski, in his essay entitled *Solidarity, Solitude*, employs the metaphor of a wall, which is both an obstacle and a creative dare. This ushers in the following question: “[...] would what arose in response to the dangerous challenge of totalitarianism cease to exist on the same day as the challenge?” (Zagajewski, 1990, p. 37). Cinema in the times of the PRL often had to engage in a strategy of an ironic game, or avail itself of other types of artistic encoding that ensured effective communication with the audience without violating the ideological limitations laid down by censorship, as exemplified by the works of Stanisław Bareja. On the other hand, the Party, by controlling contacts with countries from outside of the Eastern Bloc, provided the domestic culture with a sheltered environment, as a result of which Polish filmmakers did not have to compete for viewers. After 1989 the Polish cinematography had to give itself an answer to the question about its place on the free market.

Historians of Polish cinema deem the 1990s to be a fairly problematic period. Its very beginning seemed to be a completely improvised attempt at adopting what constituted the cultural model of Western lifestyle, fetishized at the time. As Tadeusz Lubelski put it:

When the cinema repertoire suddenly narrowed down to American movies only (in 1990 there were some weeks when movie theatres played only films from the USA; when the first European movie, Luc Besson's *Big Blue*, was finally released following a long break, it too was labeled in the press as American, as if the editors believed that other countries had disappeared from Polish cinemas forever), the very existence of domestic cinematography was questioned. (Lubelski, 2009, p. 501)

Lubelski notes with regret the irretrievable eclipse of the idea of “cinema Paradiso” – a world in which a movie viewing becomes a pretext not only for an individual experience but also for building a community around a work of art (cf. Lubelski, 2009, p. 502). The pleasure of consuming became the overarching goal in Poland for the upcoming

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for Andrzej Wajda for *Man of Iron* (Wajda, 1981), and the 1982 prizes for Jadwiga Jankowska-Cieślak for her performance in Károly Makk's *Another Way* (Makk, 1982), and for Jerzy Skolimowski for his script of *Moonlighting* (Skolimowski, 1982), as well as the 1990 prize for Krystyna Janda's role in *Interrogation* (Bugajski, 1982) (this film, made in 1982, was not released until 1989).

decade. The commentary by Mirosław Przyłipiak and Jerzy Szyłak contains a similarly critical observation: “In short, along with democracy, which in the political sphere was just taking its first baby steps, and in the economic sphere was merely beginning to lay down the foundations, Poland was hit by an immense wave of degraded culture that targeted the mass viewer and catered to the most primitive tastes” (Przyłipiak & Szyłak, 1999, p. 171). The quoted opinions of critics demonstrate a deep disappointment with the situation of cinematography in Poland a few years after the political transition. The blade of criticism was pointed especially against the consumerist approach toward movies, which was to be adopted along with other mechanisms of the capitalist transformation. From this perspective, the free-market model gains the upper hand over cinema as a tool of constructing communal identity. The individual need is placed above the collective goal.

The Polish cinema of the 1990s reacted in two different ways to this situation: it either followed the needs of the viewers, or attempted to salvage the elite values. The first approach was materialized in the so-called bandit movies, and the latter one in *cinéma d'auteur*.

### **Bandit Movies: *Psy***

The first years of the transformation were, according to movie critics, marked with the “transitional myth”: the new political system was to allow for a reorientation of the cultural paradigm, yet it was difficult to foresee the direction of this change, or how strong its effects would be (cf. Walas, 2003, pp. 104–108). As a result, there emerged a void that demanded to be filled. One of the solutions turned out to be adapting Western models to the needs of local affairs. This was the path taken by Władysław Pasikowski, among others, which is best evidenced by his *Psy* [Pigs] (Pasikowski, 1992), a cult movie from the period, drawing on the patterns of gangster cinema. This genre was fairly well-known to the Polish viewer thanks to video rentals as well as to the films shown in the 1980s at the domestic movie theatres (cf. Przyłipiak & Szyłak, 1999, pp. 170–171).

The backbone of the storyline is the life of Franz Maurer, a former Secret Police officer, who is moved to work in the police in the aftermath of the political transformation. The protagonist is also starting a new chapter in his personal life. Abandoned by his wife for an American businessman, he seeks consolation in the arms of Angela, a teenage orphan. Three of his friends are killed during an action aiming to crush a gang of car thieves. Franz conducts his own investigation and finds out that former members of the Secret Police, including Major Gross, belong to the criminal organization. He decides to administer justice on his own. He turns for help to his friend Olo

Żwirski, also a former Secret Police officer, whom the verification committee rejected and thus sentenced to unemployment. Franz's decision proves catastrophic, as Olo joins the gang without telling his friend. The betrayal is further aggravated when Olo steals away Franz's teenage lover. Olo's double game is brought to a head in the final tragic encounter: Franz fatally wounds his friend and ends up in prison.

The world as shown by Pasikowski is torn between the slowly closing past of the PRL and the as of yet vague future. Franz Maurer, played by Bogusław Linda, seems to face a fairly common dilemma of the witnesses of transformation: whether to benefit from the resources amassed by the past generations, or to adopt new, unknown solutions. In this bitter vision of the post-transformation landscape painted by Pasikowski, transferring from the Secret Police to the regular police is seen as a "change of workplaces", while collaborating with a criminal organization is a free-market alternative for those who have not found a place for themselves in the new system. The scene of stopping car thieves at a hotel shows that the old survival strategies no longer work. Former Secret Service functionaries are helpless against the new type of opponents, who have done their liberal capitalism homework. Nonchalance, lassitude, indulgence of one's own and others' mistakes, and especially the naive belief that "things will somehow work themselves out" – lose with the cold, calculated professionalism of individuals going after their own success. As a result, the protagonist faces a choice: to stand on the side of the inept system, or to join the opponent, which seems to be a very tempting option. Well-tailored suits, foreign cars, luxury apartments are just some of the props of the nascent contemporary capitalism. It is worth noting that the scenery of a large part of this movie are cafes and restaurants, spaces connected with gastronomy. Venues whose designation is consumption become the workplace of the modern gangster; tables filled with food and drink are an opportunity to "talk business". The so-called dirty work, in turn, is taken care of outside of the main stage of the Third Republic of Poland, that is in rural settings.

As noted by Przyłipiak & Szyłak, in the world of *Psy* the cardinal virtue is entrepreneurship (Przyłipiak & Szyłak, 1999, p. 184). Those who are unable to grasp the new rules of the game become pawns in the hands of more skillful players. This is visible especially in the relationship of Major Gross and Olo Żwirski. Gross, who had already experienced a year of unemployment, gives a helping hand to his former colleague, who is about to find himself in the same situation. In the free-market world, there is no greater humiliation than economic impotence. As aptly noted by Piotr Lis in one of his movie essays, Pasikowski "shows Poland at the time of a breakthrough, and every country going through a breakthrough is a place of unstable values, where truth and lies can coexist on equal terms" (Lis, 1998, p. 164). Thus, moving from a state-run institution to a "private enterprise" that violates public law is subject to a simple explanation in the context of the economic problems of those times. Such a drastic change within a short stretch of a biography shows the great risk of failure in building a civic society

brought about by the transformation that occurred almost overnight. Hopes of creating a community based on the ideals of Solidarity that underpinned the change of the political system are negatively verified in the face of an economy of simple choices that mark the everyday lives of individuals.

Yet the concept of Pasikowski's story is based primarily on the uprightness of the protagonist. Against the logic of the free market, Franz Maurer rejects Olo Żwirski's immoral proposal and takes up a lonely fight in defence of values from the canon of heroic virtues. Having lost his wife and apartment (both taken by the American businessman), his friend and his lover (taken by the friend, who joins the mafia), he decides to take revenge, which ends tragically: with the loss of his job, reputation and, ultimately, his freedom. The story clearly shows that being honourable does not necessarily pay off. This is Pasikowski's pessimistic commentary to the first years after the transformation, a commentary which seemed to resonate with the general mood of those days. As observed by Przyłipiak and Szyłak:

And so, if someone felt uncertain of the future, feared that their way of life was threatened by the possibility of losing their job and by the political changes, then *Psy* was a movie for them; if someone bitterly concluded that "nothing has changed", that Solidarity had betrayed us and the new authorities had simply "gotten their snouts in the trough" [...], then *Psy* was a movie for them, too; if someone was in awe of the images of material success, of the cult of luxury items, the possession of which was a key to happiness according to TV commercials, and at the same time discovered with mounting frustration that these wonderful cars, washing machines, refrigerators and women are for someone else, then *Psy* was a movie for them, as well. How many such people were there in Poland in the early '90s? Nobody knows exactly, but many. (Przyłipiak & Szyłak, 1999, p. 186)

It is worth mentioning that at the same time as the Polish audience welcomed Pasikowski's movie with enthusiasm, the gangster cinema of the West was taking an accelerated deconstruction course owing to Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1992). This American director, by condensing the distinctive features of this genre, laid bare the emptiness of its ideological tenet: death without a clear moral context becomes an aesthetic gesture that can be manipulated according to one's needs. As a result, cinematography objectifies and commercializes human life just like the global industry exploits the natural environment. Polish filmmakers still had to make a few more movies to reach this awareness.

### **Cinéma d'auteur: *Szamanka***

The main storyline of *Szamanka* [She-Shaman] (Żuławski, 1995) is the affair between Michał, a university lecturer of anthropology, and a girl nicknamed "The Italian", whom he chances upon at a train station. Michał offers her an apartment for rent, which is a favourable circumstance for starting a romantic relationship. The relationship ends

when the man decides to abandon his way of life and join a monastery. In a fit of rage, “The Italian” kills Michał and eats his brain with a spoon. This main storyline is complemented with numerous episodes loosely connected to the protagonists.

Polish critics dubbed Andrzej Żuławski’s movie an “ambitious failure” (cf. Szczerba, 1996, p. 10). The main accusation against *Szamanka* was the excessive chaos of the story described in Manuela Gretkowska’s script. It may have seemed that the lavish intrigue would play well with Żuławski’s typical frenetic exuberance. Yet in this case even a competent viewer had difficulties reading the authors’ basic intentions. The movie, running almost two hours long, also features, among other plots, the suicidal death of a gay priest, theft of radioactive materials perpetrated by Russian gangsters, and a mummy of a Proto-Slavic shaman. The constellation of exotic characters and unlikely events resulted in a comic-book-like, or in fact grotesque, storyline (cf. Kletowski & Marecki, 2008, p. 420). The risky script is also complemented with pseudo-philosophical conversations about the dualism of spirituality and corporeality, as well as with scenes of sex that created an aura of scandal around this film. The bad fame of *Szamanka* lingered for quite some time after the premiere owing to the later fate of Iwona Petry, who played the eponymous role. Following her sudden disappearance from public life, rumours had it that she had been committed to a mental institution or joined a monastery in Tibet; others thought this was a part of a astute marketing campaign (cf. Kutyła, 2010, p. 72).

The failure of *Szamanka* in the media and at the box office turned the critics’ attention away from the image of Poland painted by Żuławski, who was able to see it from the perspective of his years spent working and living in France, an image poignant and inconvenient for political and aesthetic reasons. Indeed, the real landscape of Warsaw in the mid-1990s was far removed from what could be seen on cinema screens at the time. The period’s filmmakers went to great pains to avoid showing the complex and heterogeneous landscape of Warsaw (an approach still employed by authors of romantic comedies). They focused primarily on locations aesthetically reflecting what the viewer of that time could interpret as a manifestation of civilizational progress. Żuławski used authentic locations in a bid to present the post-transformation drama populated mainly by homeless beggars and other down-and-outers who hadn’t learned the ruthless rules of capitalism quickly enough. Most of them, according to the director, were real people. They followed the film crew in hope of a free catering meal. They worked as extras for lunch (cf. Kletowski & Marecki, 2008, p. 422). Żuławski claimed that this move was meant to illustrate the fiasco of the Polish political transformation. In an interview devoted to *Szamanka*, he spoke of the tragic effects of economic polarization of the 1990s, which irreversibly divided the society into winners and losers. He also noted that contemporary filmmakers seemed indifferent to this fact: “They grasped onto everything that was new and shiny: the Mercedes and glass buildings. [...] But as soon

as you stepped out of the TV building, you'd trip on the muddy sidewalk and a broke wino would be asking for some change" (Kletowski & Marecki, 2008, p. 421).

The main male character, another performance by Bogusław Linda, is also marked by failure. Michał leaves his fiancée from a good family for an uneducated girl from the provinces, of whom not much can be said. Their tragic love affair consists mostly of long, passionate intercours, and it ends as soon as Michał decides to abandon the meagre life of subjection to corporeal sensuality in order to pursue the lofty and spiritual. "The Italian" cannot face losing her lover, and so she hits him on the head with a tin can, killing him on the spot. This prop seems to be an ironic reference to Andy Warhol's *ready-made*. In the world of pop-art symbols, the Campbell soup can is an icon of consumerist lifestyle. In Żuławski's movie, it becomes a double-edged sword of capitalist revolution: what was to nourish and give strength ultimately brings woe. According to Julian Kutyła, the relationship between Michał and "The Italian" shows traces of the fin-de-siècle Young Polish peasant-mania: a nihilist from the intelligentsia, in search of the sense of his empty existence, opens up to what is close to nature, and implicitly not tarnished by civilization yet (cf. Kutyła, 2010, pp. 76–77). But if one follows the tropes in Żuławski's movie, it is easy to see that "The Italian" has nothing of the natural purity of modernistic fields and forests: she wears a provocative mini skirt, she eats at fast food joints, listens to music from the MTV... in short, she is a product of her times. The symbolic gesture of fraternizing with the lower social class is ineffective, as this class turns out to represent the same order that the protagonist wanted to escape from. The Polish "peasants" of the '90s keenly jettison what could be deemed homely in favour of the aesthetics of a world imported from the West. "The Italian" eats the brain of her lover, just as the free market devours the intelligentsia ethos.

It is also worth pointing out the special significance of Bogusław Linda's roles for those times: as an actor he had the opportunity to portray the heroes of the generational transformation after 1989. Owing to his cooperation with the top directors of *cinéma d'auteur* of the 1980s, such as Andrzej Wajda (*Man of Iron*: Wajda, 1981) or Krzysztof Kieślowski (*Blind Chance*: Kieślowski, 1981; *The Decalogue*: Kieślowski, 1988), he entered the last decade of the twentieth century with a remarkable acting portfolio, proving that he was able to compellingly render the hopes and pursuits of the heroes of broadly understood contemporaneity. This ability was keenly employed by filmmakers of the '90s, who cast Linda in roles that reflected the problems of that period. Participation in high-budget action movies secured him the status of a pop culture icon. Linda, at the time occasionally compared to Humphrey Bogart, created the image of a tough man who can face up to any obstacle, regardless of the price he has to pay (cf. Lubelski, 2009, p. 566). This type of hero was far removed from the roles that Linda's audiences had been used to since the previous decade. The aspirations and faith in the world changing for the better give way to bitterness and disappointment brought by the changes that have already taken place and must inevitably continue to take place.

It is also telling that as soon as the twenty-first century rolled around, this actor's presence on the silver screen greatly diminished in comparison to the preceding period. The overexploited image of Linda was unanimously associated with the type of hero whose time had passed. Having done its homework on the first years of wild capitalism, the Polish cinematography had to embark on a new path in search of its identity and its place in the new post-transformation social order.

### **Another Way**

Władysław Pasikowski's and Andrzej Żuławski's films can be reproached for a lot: their formally derivative nature, excessive simplifications, technical shortcomings. The once cult one-liners from *Psy* (such as "And who's died is dead", "Cuz' she was an evil woman") are funny rather than exciting today, even though right after the premiere all of Poland spoke Franz Maurer's language, thus making him a hero of his times. The role of women in this post-transformation imaginary is also confounding (cf. Keff, 2010, p. 25). Maurer's absent wife sends her American lover to take over the luxurious villa that once belonged to her and her husband. The protagonist moves to a run-down studio. On the other hand, his present lover, a teenage orphan, cheats on him with his friend who has joined a drug gang for, as we can easily figure out, fear of unemployment. The character of "The Italian" complements this awful image of women as not fully autonomous beings, treacherous parasites interested in their provider only as long as he has enough life-giving juices. Within the context of neoliberal capitalism, the juices are money, of course. Women are absent, and when they do come on screen, they either say little (Angela) or speak unintelligibly ("The Italian"), but they always act to the detriment of those to whom they owe gratitude.

From the perspective of 20 years, this image is shocking for its sexist ignorance. As Maria Janion observed in her speech opening the 2009 Women's Congress, the Solidarity revolution only affected half of the society. "Democracy in Poland is of the masculine gender" – concluded the scholar with irony (Janion, 2020). Men are the authors and the target beneficiaries of the transformation. The women's place is somewhere among them, but not too close, or else things can take a sinister turn, warn the filmmakers of those times.

Yet the failure of the discussed movies is most visible in juxtaposition with their points of reference: in the case of *Psy* – commercial American cinema, and in the case of *Szamanka* – the European *cinéma d'auteur*. The Polish transformation had to find its legitimization in symbolic language, to which end cinema seemed to be the best suited medium, owing to its impact on potential viewers. In order to strengthen the validity of this attempt, filmmakers often availed themselves of the strategies of centres/institu-



tions that the historical experience reckoned effective in this type of endeavours: “if we want to show the lives of gangsters, let’s do it like the Americans do it (or at least still did in the ‘70s); after all, that’s the origin of the capitalism we want to learn”. The imitation attempts involved especially the visual layer of films: from the meticulously chosen location, through the characterization of actors, to the aesthetics of promotion campaigns. This fascination with the Western film industry lays bare the striking contrast between the goals and the means by which they were to be achieved. The years of the PRL had solidified numerous complexes and phantasms anchored in the messianic Romantic ideology of martyrdom. In the sphere of culture, the civilizational backwardness was to be made up for, or at least covered up, by way of hurried adoption of models from mature democracies. Yet without the awareness and acceptance of its own position, the world of art – of cinema art in this case – unwittingly exposed what it tried so hard to erase. Jerzy Pilch in his book entitled *Rozpacz z powodu utraty furmanki* [Despair Caused by the Loss of a Wagon] (Pilch, 2003) describes the dissonance between the political changes and the inertia of identity shaped by centuries of tumultuous relations with the neighbours. One of his essays bears the motto from Czesław Miłosz that superbly illustrates the moment in which Poles found themselves just after the collapse of communism: “In the shadow of the Empire, among hens, in Old Slavonic long-johns / You’d better learn to like your shame, because it will stay with you. / It won’t go away even if you change your country..” (Miłosz, 2003, p. 376). Poland is a post-colonial country entangled in a web of complicated dependencies on countries that colonized it and those it colonized itself. Within this system, a sensation of superiority is mixed with weakness, aggression and other still undiagnosed complexes (cf. Janion, 2007, pp. 327–330). Thoughtless adoption of Western cultural patterns takes on the form of a symbolic colonization, which consolidates the position of Poland as a country of as of yet undefined identity.

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Polish cinematography of the turbulent times of political transformation did its best to keep up with the constantly changing political and economic reality with the use of tools elaborated in the West. In this period, there were many more films as derivative as *Psy* or *Szamanka*. The endless pursuit of Europe and America seems to be one of the main motifs in the cultural story of Poland from the late twentieth century. Perhaps this story goes back even further, and the transformation of 1989 simply set in motion the machinery of phantasms rooted deep in the nation. Polish cinematography of the 1990s seems to be “close enough” – almost like the Western one. Yet this “almost” makes a tremendous difference, and perhaps it is there that the Polish identity lies: forever torn between the reality that is hard to accept and the dreams of a better world.

Translated by Maja Jaros

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### ***Close enough – obrazy porażki transformacji ustrojowej w Polsce lat dziewięćdziesiątych XX wieku na przykładzie *Psów* Władysława Pasikowskiego i *Szamanki* Andrzeja Żuławskiego***

**Abstrakt:** Niniejszy tekst problematyzuje kwestię polskiego kina lat dziewięćdziesiątych XX wieku w kategoriach estetyki porażki. Kluczowe znaczenie dla tego rozpoznania ma perspektywa postkolonialna, w której Polska czasów transformacji jawi się jako kraina niespełnionych marzeń o byciu-jak-Zachód, co widać m.in. w kine-matografii tamtego okresu.

**Wyrażenia kluczowe:** porażka; Polska; *close enough*; kino; Andrzej Żuławski; Władysław Pasikowski

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